Mark Strama

Mark Strama is co-founder and CEO of NewVoter.com, Inc., an Austin-based Internet start-up that licenses voter registration software to political, non-profit, and commercial web sites. In 1999, Mark also co-founded Charitygift, Inc., one of the premiere charity fundraising sites on the Internet. Visitors to www.charitygift.com can make a charitable donation in the name of a friends, family members, or business associates, and send them a card announcing that a donation has been made in their name. Card recipients then return to the web site and direct the donations to the charity of *their* choice.

Previously, Mark was Director of Programs at Rock the Vote, a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to the political empowerment of young Americans. While at Rock the Vote he worked with MTV, celebrity supporters, record companies, radio stations, corporate sponsors, philanthropic foundations, new technologies, and thousands of volunteers to help register over half a million new voters in the 1996 elections. Mark's major accomplishments at Rock the Vote include:

- **Web site and 800 number.** Conceived of, obtained sponsorship for, and implemented programs that made it possible for the first time ever to fill out a voter registration form over an 800 number and on the Internet.
- **Grassroots.** Created turnkey voter registration "kits" for local volunteers, including get-out-the-vote "pledge card" campaign, that enabled Rock the Vote to reach young people at a grassroots level.
- **Debate Watch.** Produced largest Debate Watch event of 1996, with 2,500 college students watching the Presidential debate on JumboTron screens in the University of San Diego gymnasium.
- **Media appearances.** Appeared in numerous national television interviews and news articles to advocate youth political participation and issues such as freedom of expression and higher education funding.
- **Rock the Nation.** Developed successful $2.4 million grant proposal to Pew Charitable Trusts for a new campaign on civic engagement and youth activism.

From 1991 to 1995, Mark served as Chief of Staff for Texas State Senator Rodney Ellis (*D-Houston*), named one of Texas' Ten Best Legislators by *Texas Monthly* magazine in 1995. He was responsible for developing legislative initiatives to benefit Senator Ellis' inner-city district, handling all media inquiries, and supervising a 17 person staff. Among his legislative accomplishments:

- **Charity Care**. Helped pass a bill making Texas the first state in the nation to require tax exempt hospitals to perform a specified amount of charity care.
- **Judicial Campaign Reform**. Drafted and helped pass first-ever limits on fundraising and expenditures by Texas judicial candidates.
- **Insurance Redlining**. Helped create the nation's first law giving consumers the right to sue insurance companies for unfair discrimination.
- **Motor Voter**. Helped pass a motor voter law in Texas more than a year before passage of the federal motor voter bill.

Mark began his career in politics as a researcher and writer in the policy department of Ann Richards' successful 1990 Texas gubernatorial campaign. He also created the theme for Richards' inauguration (*The People of Texas Are Back!*).

He graduated from Brown University in 1990, with degrees in Philosophy and Political Science.

Testimony of Mark Strama, VP Public Elections, *election.com*
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election.com appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony to the House Administration Committee on the subject of voting technology reform. While *election.com* personnel collectively possess elections experience covering hundreds of years and thousands of elections, as a company we are one of the newer entrants to this marketplace. *election.com* is not currently in the voting machine business; we sell open standards software for voter registration database management and election administration. Our software is compatible with hardware sold by any of the voting equipment vendors. Because of this, I hope we will be able to offer you an insider's perspective on the elections industry that is also independent and objective.

1. **Would the voting machine industry be able to replace outdated machines by 2002? By 2004?**

All indications are that a dramatic surge in demand would burden the voting equipment vendors beyond their capacity to respond. In fact, I have spoken with a few state election officials who have counties that are eager to purchase touch screen voting machines, but there are no DRE's certified in their states. They have speculated that the time-consuming process of applying for certification in states that require state-specific certification has forced the industry effectively to triage their marketing efforts, attending to the priority opportunities and leaving the other jurisdictions without the fullest range of options. One vendor's representative said as much at a recent task force meeting of the National Conference of State Legislatures. She said she is advising counties to place their orders for new equipment sooner rather than later, because orders will be shipped "on a first come, first served basis." Interestingly, she was responding to a question about whether jurisdictions should wait until federal funding is approved before procuring new systems – which perhaps sheds some light on the importance of this committee's deliberations.

In the background of this analysis is the possibility that one or more major computer equipment manufacturers will build a touch screen voting device that meets certification requirements and that addresses the customers' needs. Based on our extensive conversations with elections officials, such a device would not be an off-the-shelf computer at this point; there are too many unique requirements of a voting system that cannot be satisfied by commodity computers. However, a commodity hardware vendor could build and scale the manufacture of a customized voting device made up of commodity components. *election.com* is actively engaged in discussions that could lead to such a development. We believe it is important to attract the biggest and best technology companies in the world into this marketplace.

2. **What can be done to improve the equipment certification process?**

Because *election.com* has not submitted a voting system for certification, I cannot comment from experience on the certification *process*. However, we have studied extensively the NASED certification requirements, and would urge Congress to provide all necessary funding to the FEC's Office of Election Administration for them to complete the already-begun updating of those standards. Additionally, we support standards that require full accessibility for persons with disabilities.

3. **How can the costs of voting equipment be reduced?**

The attractive-sounding idea out there – and it is one in which we have invested a great deal of research – is that you can allow voting on off-the-shelf touch screens that are networked to local servers at the polling place. As desirable as this would be in terms of cost, our conversations with elections officials indicate that this solution simply is not practical for them. While it is possible to demonstrate this solution successfully at isolated polling places, to implement this solution on a wide scale on Election Day would be impossible for Election Day poll workers as they are currently deployed. Further, a server-based solution creates a single point-of-failure at a polling site, meaning that if the server goes down, the entire polling site is out of business. This is unacceptable to every election official we have talked to. And as soon as you start building in the redundancy in the servers and in the network infrastructure that would address these problems, you eliminate the cost savings that originally justified the solution in the first place.

There is, however, an idea that I think makes a lot of sense. One of our customers for our voter registration and election management software is a county that tabulates over 30% of its votes during an early voting period. During this early voting period voters are allowed to vote at any one of 30 locations around the county. Then, on Election Day, the county operates about 300 polling locations for a 12 hour period.

Some of the election commissioners in this county have suggested that if they could expand the number of early voting locations to about 100, continuing to allow voters to vote at any of them, and keep those locations open through Election Day, there would be no need for the additional 200 sites.

The current model of conducting elections at hundreds of thousands of polling locations on one day presents an enormous and expensive logistical challenge to elections officials. They are required to provide reliable equipment and competent staffing for enough polling places to process over 100 million voters in one day. And yet out of all these polling places they are required to open, an individual voter can go to only one of them. So this huge investment in a temporary infrastructure isn't really doing anything to make the voting process more convenient to the voter.

It seems to me that a system with half as many polling places open for a longer period of time – and where a voter can vote at any of them – would be much more convenient and accessible for the voter. Equally importantly, it would significantly reduce the amount of equipment counties must purchase – enabling them to invest in superior technology, including a server-based solution if that meets their needs. Finally, it would enable them to provide better training and better compensation to a smaller number of election workers – addressing one of the most important elements of election reform.

4. **From your perspective, what federal action could help facilitate technological improvements in the voting process?**

I mentioned earlier that *election.com* believes that the biggest and best technology companies in the world need to be engaged in the election reform effort. While many large companies have begun looking at this market in the wake of Election 2000, the single most effective way to attract these companies into the elections business is for Congress to demonstrate its commitment to funding new and better voting technology. Structuring this funding in a way that incents and rewards increased state and local investment will also increase the attractiveness of the election technology market to the companies that need to be a part of this solution.

Finally, we would encourage Congress to remain focused on the broader issues relating to election reform, and not just voting equipment. People, process, and procedure have as much to do with election integrity as punch cards. The accuracy of the voter registration database is critical to ensuring that everyone who should be allowed to vote is allowed to vote, and to preventing fraudulent voters from voting. Indeed, the voter registration database is in many ways the "operating system" of the election – it is impossible to build a reliable election infrastructure without a reliable voter file at its foundation. In addition, a state-of-the-art voter database is the true bridge to the future of elections, in which voters are offered the flexibility of voting at any polling site and eventually the convenience of voting over the Internet.

5. **Do you have any suggestions on how technology can help improve our armed services voting programs?**

First, let me say that the Federal Voting Assistance Program at the Department of Defense does an outstanding job of educating and assisting overseas voters, who along with disabled voters face the greatest challenge in exercising their right to vote. FVAP has already piloted what *election.com* believes is the correct solution for military voters – Internet voting.

As background, I should observe that *election.com* conducts elections over the Internet every day for private organizations – non-profits, trade associations, and labor unions. We hope someday to see the efficiency, convenience, and economy of the Internet brought to the public election process. However, the adoption of remote Internet voting will be incremental and evolutionary.

The first step toward Internet voting should be Internet voting for the military. Secure mechanisms already exist for authenticating the identity of military personnel through the Internet, and secure networks exist for the transmission of their votes.

If the standard for Internet voting is that it must be at least as secure as the status quo system of voting, *election.com* believes Internet voting is a great deal more secure and reliable than the status quo for overseas military voters. Overseas voters currently have no way of guaranteeing that their votes will be received in time for their votes to count, and many are forced to transmit their votes through the insecure and unreliable network known as foreign mail carriers. There is no question that Internet voting is relatively more secure and reliable than the status quo for these voters.

Conclusion

On behalf of *election.com,* I would like to again thank this committee for its very important work on the issue of election reform. Last year's election highlighted some very important needs, but we must also put the episode in perspective. 100 million Americans voted in a 15 hour period, and at the end of the day the outcome was decided by fewer than 1,000 votes. Attempting to calibrate an exercise of that magnitude to that degree of precision is like trying to weigh subatomic particles on a bathroom scale. *election.com* commends you for your efforts to improve the process, and we are prepared to assist your efforts in any way that we can.